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WHEN MUSIC IS WHAT MATTERS

FROM FOLK TO PUNK, THERE'S SOMETHING FOR ALL TASTES

IAN McGILLIS SPECIAL TO THE GAZETTE

OPRAH MAY HAVE STEPPED DOWN, but the brand of self-congratulatory celebrity confessional she helped foster is as popular as ever, if a glance at recent music books is any indication. Shania Twain, Steven Tyler, Scott Weiland, Brian Johnson of AC/DC – all are plugging tales of varying degrees of victimhood, addiction and redemption.

But beyond the headline-hogging star memoirs lies a rich and varied assortment of books covering every genre from folk to punk, and ranging in focus from epic overviews to the smallest of local scenes. What links them is their common faith that what matters, in the end, is the music.

PIERRE OBENDRAUF GAZETTE FILE PHOTO

Murray Lightburn (left) rehearses with fellow members of The Dears Patrick Krief and Roberto Arquilla this past February. The Montreal band is the subject of a new book by Lorraine Carpenter.

It says something for how well Bob Dylan has cultivated his own myth, and for how many interpretations his work continues to inspire, that succeeding generations of writers feel compelled to grapple with the enigma. I own roughly 30 Dylan books and don't even consider myself an obsessive. Now, as the man himself turns 70, comes another wave, led by **The Ballad of Bob Dylan: A Portrait,** by Daniel Mark Epstein (Harper, 496 pages, $31.99). Though he covers all the landmarks in Dylan's life, Epstein is not engaged in biography in the strictest sense; rather, he presents an idiosyncratic and elliptical charting of Dylan's progress, and of his own life, through close examination of specific Dylan concerts he has attended through the years, from a solo Washington, D.C., show in 1963 to a 2009 instalment in Dylan's late-career Never Ending Tour. As a near-contemporary of Dylan, Epstein is in a better position than most to show how the meaning of an artist's work, and the nature of that work's effect on its audience, evolves over the long haul. An unabashed fan, Epstein is still no sentimentalist: the 2009 Dylan, he writes, evinces "the winding down of a well-designed but relentlessly used machine that has not always been properly maintained." Ouch.

Taking a more academic tack is **Bob Dylan: Like a Complete Unknown**, by David Yaffe (Yale University Press, 171 pages, $23). Young by Dylanologist standards – he's in his late 30s – Yaffe indulges some practices seemingly designed to show the elders he knows his stuff, like incorporating Dylan lyrics into his own prose. This grows enormously annoying over the course of a book. But he also takes some risks a more established Bob scholar might shy away from, especially when writing about his subject's relationship with race: the great 1983 ballad Blind Willie McTell, Yaffe posits, amounts to an act of atonement by its creator, guilty for having appropriated so much from African-American culture. At moments like those you can almost hear the howls of the loyalists off in the distance, and for such fearlessness – and for keeping it all to the point – Yaffe deserves our gratitude.

Happy news indeed for all students of Canadian music history is the appearance of an expanded reissue of **Have Not Been the Same: The Canrock Renaissance 1985–1995 by Michael Barclay,** Ian A.D. Jack and Jason Schneider (ECW, 739 pages, $29.95). Named for a song by the Vancouver band Slow, the book is an exhaustive and passionately executed overview of the period when Canada and its musicians finally shrugged off the cloak of cultural deference and began to sing, unapologetically, as itself. There's scarcely a band or singer, major or minor, not given proper due in these pages. The figureheads – Tragically Hip, Blue Rodeo, Sloan, Rheostatics, et al. – have their unlikely success stories told, but the real soul of the book, and its greatest value, is in its rescue from oblivion of forgotten prophets like Edmonton's Jr Gone Wild, a band of loose cannons to whom all current alt-country acts owe a debt, whether they know it or not.

A nice companion volume to the above is **Trouble in the Camera Club: A Photographic Narrative of Toronto's Punk History 1976–1980,** by Don Pyle (ECW, 300 pages, $29.95). Pyle was a teenager in the years when Toronto, its downtown still an ungentrified setting of glamour and danger, saw the first Canadian stirrings of an oppositional new style incubated in New York and London. Already a Lou Reed fan, Pyle was primed, and took his camera to all the shows. Visiting stars (The Ramones, Blondie, Iggy Pop) are shown, but the true spirit of the book is in its live-action portraits of local heroes like the Viletones, the Curse, and the Diodes. Just as evocative are casual shots of fans on the street, at house parties, in the laundromat.

Pyle captures in aspic the great contradictions of punk: individuality expressed through the gathering of like-minded souls, innocence celebrated through nihilism.

Not for nothing did The Dears title one of their albums Gang of Losers. For their fans, an essential element of the Montreal band's appeal has been its status as the perennial almost-weres of Canadian rock, arriving on the scene too late to benefit from the Britpop wave that so clearly inspired them, and too early to reap the rewards of the secular revival-meeting spirit subsequently surfed to worldwide fame by fellow Montrealers Arcade Fire.

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